

## Earth-Friendly Gardening & Landscaping



### Hanging Baskets: Gardening at Eye Level

Hanging baskets have come a long way from the plastic potted geraniums traditionally sold outside supermarkets. Garden centers beckon with Old World styled wrought-iron cages or light and elegant moss-filled wire baskets, along with artisan-forged hooks and brackets. And trailing petunias must now compete with an entire aerial garden of colorful snapdragons and fragrant heliotropes, surrounded by a riot of verbena, trailing lantana, nasturtiums, and Italian bellflowers.

Choosing your style of hanging garden partially depends on location and desired effect. Don't set your heart on an overflowing jewel box of dazzling plants if your heavily shaded entryway can only accommodate a single accent plant or hanging fern.

Remember the gardener's mantra: the right plant (or plants) in the right place. And don't forget about your budget! Plastic is obviously less expensive and generally less attractive than wrought-iron, but you can partially remedy the situation by selecting plants which will completely cover the pot itself. Even so, you may

want to substitute a woven hanger or metal chain in lieu of the galvanized hook wired onto most plastic containers.

Another important consideration is whether the hanging basket will become part of your design. For some gardeners, the antiqued bronze hook and Renaissance-themed wire basket is as important a design element as the plants living inside it. Similarly, you might try to match your container to your home: perhaps your country cottage

would look best with a series of rustic brushwood baskets hanging from the eaves.

And before you begin to pick out plants, you should also consider both the basket liner and soil mix. Plastic has the advantage of retaining moisture more effectively than wire baskets, and will last for years. But for some, nothing compares with the natural beauty of baskets filled with moss or, more commonly, coir-fiber. Environmentally, some folks prefer the latter,



made from recycled coco fibers, rather than sphagnum moss, which is sometimes mined from sensitive bog areas. Other choices include liners fabricated from jute or sisal fibers.

Fiber and moss liners look great — but they do dry out quickly, a real problem if you tend to forget your sun-parched planters, or leave town for days-on-end. My friend Tony swears by lining the inside of his basket with sheets of newsprint to prevent water loss hopefully NOT this column!. Another option is capillary matting, sold by the roll and easily cut to fit inside your containers. These highly absorbent mats can store and release water to root systems for days. Manufacturers suggest that they might even reduce watering requirements by up to 80 percent.

Your planting mix should be customized for hanging baskets, being both lightweight and porous to provide good drainage and aeration, while retaining moisture. Some container mixes are actually soil-less, and blend together peat moss or sphagnum moss, sand, vermiculite and/or perlite, and often include slow-release fertilizers. To one of these mixes you might consider adding one of the water-absorbent gels produced from polymerized potassium. These crystals are touted to act as reservoirs for water, holding up to 200 times their weight in

water. But be sure to keep your watering wand handy!

Before rushing out to fill your basket, remember that only a large container, generally 16 inches in diameter or more, can readily sustain a large and dramatic collection of plants. Do not overwhelm smaller baskets with a nursery cart full of plants: a very common failing, and one I admit to myself. Containers less than 14 inches in diameter should only host a handful of favorites, probably two or three of the same plant, although you might include some trailing foliage plants, like ivy or asparagus fern, to provide texture and visual contrast. Smaller pots might only support a single plant, so pick something exuberant and colorful, combining a long-blooming period with a cascading form, such as variegated ivy geraniums or trailing verbena, like the aptly named 'Babylon' variety.

For larger containers, select a "portfolio" of plants with similar requirements for sun, moisture, and feeding. Your hanging basket is a community, and no one plant should dominate the others or exhaust all of the water and nutrients. Shady locations should get shade-loving plants; sunny sites, sun-lovers.

And think of your hanging garden as a living floral arrangement. Depending on your taste and personality, you might choose a harmonious grouping

of plants, such as soothing lavender and purple, blended with vines and foliage of green and silver. Or you might like the energy of contrasting a variety of hot, bright colors bursting out in all directions, and uniting the red, orange, yellow, and white blooms with gold, grey, and green foliage plants, such as the variegated ivies and pineapple mint, or lacy leaves of artemisia.

Your arrangement should also favor blends of textures and growth habits, taller geraniums and salvia, mounding petunias, annual vincas, begonias, and cascading multi-hued million bells, bluish-purple scaevola, or tried-and-true trailing lobelia and sweet alyssum.

For planning purposes, try to develop a shopping list in advance, organized into "planting zones" for your container. You will want an upright, compact, and colorful plant for the center of your container, and up to five or seven similar - not overpowering -- plants to fill the remaining top of the basket. Around the edge, plan on several plants to flow over the rim, filling the area between the top of the basket and the bottom, and several more trailing plants or vines to provide a fluid verticality to the whole. Either select personal favorites for your list, or consult with one of the skilled horticulturists at your favorite garden center.



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